

# Elk

## Description:

Elk are also known as Wapiti, a Shawnee name meaning "white rump." People in Europe use the word "elk" to describe what we know as moose. So, sometimes biologists prefer to use 'Wapiti' to clearly distinguish North American elk from the moose.

## White Rump

What does an elk look like? To start off, elk are big. The elk is the second largest member of the deer family in the world; only the moose is larger. An elk's body weight is three times that of mule deer.

In the spring, the large body of an adult elk is reddish brown with darker chestnut brown fur on the neck and legs. In late summer, an elk's coat changes to a brownish-gray color. Mature males, called bulls, can be identified in herds at a distance of a mile or more because they often are much lighter in color (almost white) in contrast to cows and yearling bulls.

When people imagine an elk, they often envision huge antlers. Male elk grow antlers annually to display dominance and occasionally for defense. They usually have at least five tines, or forks, and can be as long as 6 feet. A pair of antlers taken from a male can sometimes weigh up to 40 pounds! Can you imagine carrying that much weight on your head? Because antlers are grown every year, they have to get really big really fast. In the peak of the summer, sunlight stimulates antler growth at a rate of about an inch a day. That's about as much as our hair grows every two months!

If you ever hear an elk, the noise is most likely coming from rutting bulls. They emit a "bugle" or "whistle" which serves as a warning to other bulls and a way to tell the ladies who is dominant. The vocalization begins as a bellow, changes almost immediately to a loud, shrill whistle or scream, and ends with a series of grunts. Because they are social animals, cows neigh to their calves and may also whistle during the spring but not as loudly as bulls.

## More Than One Kind of Elk

Four varieties of elk live in North America. The most familiar is the Rocky Mountain Elk that ranges throughout the Rocky Mountain states, including Idaho. More information about the Rocky Mountain Elk can be found at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation link - <http://www.rmef.org/> The Manitoban Elk of Saskatchewan and Manitoba has a larger body but smaller antlers. The Roosevelt's Elk of Oregon and Washington has an even larger body but has modest antlers. The rare Tule Elk of central and northern California is the smallest with bulls averaging a mere 550 pounds.

## How can I find an Elk?

Elk live in a variety of habitats but usually prefer alpine meadows in summer, and then move to lower, densely-wooded slopes in winter. Once you figure out where elk reside, there should be no difficulty in identifying the track of an elk. It is larger and rounder than a deer track, and rounder and somewhat smaller than a moose track. In winter, look for large pits in the snow where elk dig for food. Late in the winter you might see large scrapes on tree bark where male elk have thrashed around trying to remove the velvet off their antlers. Elk daybeds are flattened places in grass or snow where they may have rested to chew their cud. For an added treat, elk chew the bark of aspen trees with their lower incisor teeth.

## What They Eat and What Eats Them

Elk eat a lot of food! Elk primarily graze in spring and summer but may browse on woody vegetation in winter if grasses, sedges, and forbs (low-growing, soft-stemmed plants) are unavailable. Elk need about 10 to 15 pounds of vegetation per day. In the winter, elk consume lichens (mossy plants) since they are one of the few foods available.

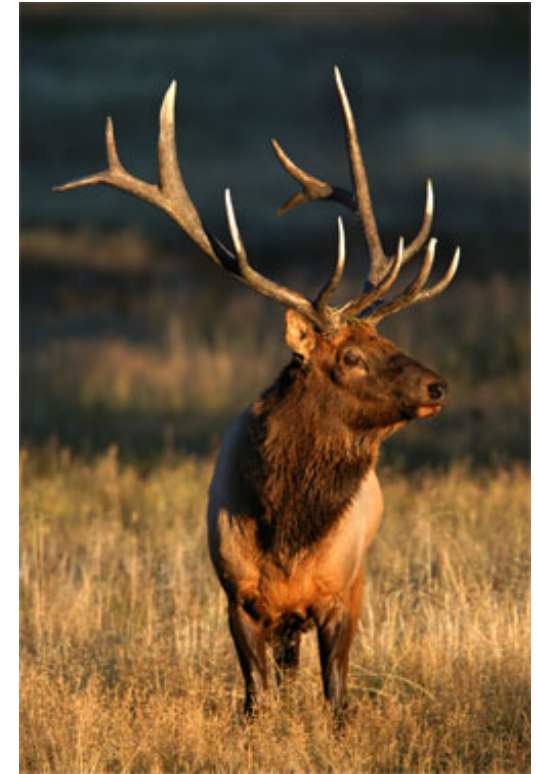
Think about how much food you can fit in your stomach, then imagine having a stomach with more than one compartment! An elk is a ruminant, which means it has a special stomach with four parts to digest plant food that is eaten rapidly. The large amount of food is devoured in a short time to limit an elk's exposure to predators and is then stored in a large chamber. While resting, the elk regurgitates this food (known as cud) so that it can chew it more thoroughly. When it is completely chewed, the elk swallows it again and the cud goes into a second chamber for even more digestion. When the food passes into a third chamber, water is squeezed out and absorbed into the elk's body. The fourth and "true" stomach breaks the food down and it is finally absorbed in the intestine. That sounds like a lot of work for a meal!

Predators of the elk include bear, mountain lions, wolves, and coyotes. Calves may fall victim to coyotes, wolves, and bobcats. Unfortunately, poachers will also kill bull elk just to cut off their antlers which are highly sought for medicinal uses, jewelry, decorations, and house wares.

## Cool Adaptations

An elk's teeth have sharp incisors for biting off plants and broad, flat molars for mashing plants. Molars line both the upper and lower jaw, but incisors occur only on the lower jaw. A cross section of an elk's tooth will show annual growth rings, just like a tree. An elk's coat helps with camouflage and helps keep it warm or cool depending on the season. Twice a year, elk shed every hair on their body. An elk's winter coat is five times warmer than its summer coat enabling it to be outside on extremely cold winter days. The coat consists of two layers - thick, long guard hairs and a dense woolly undercoat. An elk's long legs are packed with muscles that are perfect for taking long strides to escape danger. Eyes located on the sides of their head give elk a wider range of vision to detect movement and danger.

## Small Groups, Large Calves



Elk  
© Richard Mousel



Footprint  
No Map  
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Elk
2. **Scientific Name:** *Cervus Elaphus*
3. **Population:** About 1 million in North America
4. **Size:** Weight: Male (Bull) - 700 to 900 lbs.  
Height: 5'6" at the shoulder length

During the mating season, bulls will gather groups of cows and calves called "harems." Some of the younger males are not able to compete for females, so they group together in bachelor groups. Mating occurs in the fall; calves are born in mid-May through July and their coat remains spotted until late summer. Similar to other hoofed mammals, protective adaptations of young elk include a spotted coat, a lack of scent, and a capacity to remain still and silent. For the remainder of the year, cows, calves and yearlings live in loose herds or groups. Bulls live in bachelor groups. A herd may consist of up to 1000 animals.

#### **Range/ Distribution**

Prior to the 1800s, elk ranged throughout North America except Alaska and Florida. Elk are now not as numerous but are still found in many different parts of the United States. Today, there are about 1 million Rocky Mountain elk living across northern parts of Asia, Europe, Canada and throughout many Northwestern and Southwestern states.

Height: 5-6 feet at the shoulder. Length: 8-10 feet from nose to tail. Weight: Female (Cow) - 500 to 700 lbs. Height: 4-5 feet at the shoulder. Length: 6-8 feet from nose to tail. Weight: Newborn (Calf) - 35 lbs.

5. **Diet:** Grasses, sedges, forbs, and sometimes lichens.
6. **Young:** 1, rarely 2 per year; called a calf.
7. **Lifespan:** 8-10 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Vertebrata  
Class: Mammalia  
Order: Artiodactyla  
Family: Cervidae
9. **Hunted in Idaho:** Yes
10. **Hunting Link:**